



STAR OF THE SEA

Bob Ragains


In each issue of *Koholā Connection*, through our “Star of the Sea” column, we will highlight special people who are making a difference in ocean conservation, particularly in the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. This time, we are highlighting the 2007 Sanctuary Volunteer of the Year Bob Ragains.

The sanctuary has a long history of attracting highly motivated and dedicated volunteers who donate thousands of hours towards daily operations and public programs, and Bob is no exception. Bob, who retired from the U.S. Army in 1978, and his wife Carol, started visiting Maui in 1986, primarily to escape the cold mainland winters. When their stays became more frequent and longer in duration, Bob searched for volunteer work to fill his time.

After a friend shared a sanctuary brochure with him in 2000, Bob decided to learn more about whales by volunteering. Initially, his volunteer hours were limited, but after moving to Maui permanently in 2007, Bob started spending more time volunteering at the sanctuary, and has since become an indispensable asset to the organization, logging 30+ hours per week.

Bob's primary responsibility is to assist with the coordination of the volunteer whale watch program, which includes scheduling volunteers, participating in onboard whale watch cruises, and acting as a liaison between the whale watching company and the sanctuary's volunteer

programs & outreach coordinator. He also gives the popular whale presentation known as the “45 Ton Talk” twice a week in the Sanctuary Education Center, and once a week he works at the information station at the Maui Ocean Center, where he talks to visitors about whales and helps them spot whale activity on the water.

“I don't know what I would do if I didn't volunteer at the sanctuary, I really love it,” Bob says. In April, Bob was recognized for his efforts at the annual sanctuary volunteer appreciation barbeque at Camp Olowalu on the west coast of Maui. He was also nominated for the 2007 National Marine Sanctuary Foundation's Volunteer of the Year Award, which was announced in June of this year at the 2008 Capitol Hill Ocean Week (CHOW). Winning the award was Brian Diveley, a graduate student at East Carolina University for his work as lead member of an archaeology team excavating fragile artifacts from the wreck of the historic Civil War ironclad USS *Monitor*. CHOW is an internationally recognized forum where a diverse spectrum of ocean science and management experts, stakeholders and policy makers can come together to discuss, examine and exchange information about the key issues affecting the health of our oceans and marine resources. The sanctuary staff are proud to have volunteers like Bob working alongside them everyday and are proud to recognize Bob as the 2007 Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary Volunteer of the Year. 

Sanctuary System

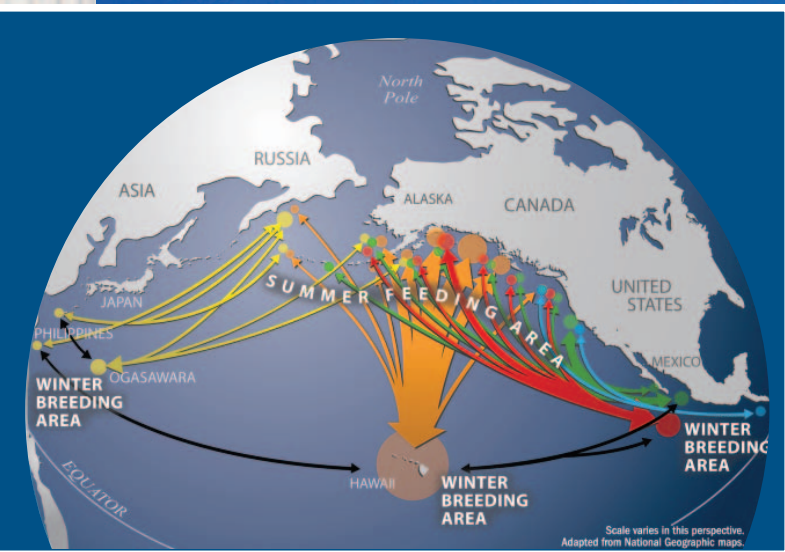
The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries serves as the trustee for a system of 14 marine protected areas, encompassing more than 150,000 square miles of ocean and Great Lakes waters. The system includes 13 national marine sanctuaries and the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. The sanctuary system is managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which works cooperatively with the public to protect sanctuaries while maintaining compatible recreational and commercial activities. Sanctuary staff work to enhance public awareness of our nation's marine resources and maritime heritage through scientific research, monitoring, exploration, educational programs and outreach. For more information, visit <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov>.



NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARIES

SPLASH Research

Long-Awaited Report Finds Increase in
North Pacific Humpback Whale Population



After four years of an intensive international study called Structure of Population, Levels of Abundance and Status of Humpback Whales in the North Pacific (SPLASH), the long-awaited research project's report on population is in. The number of humpback whales in the North Pacific has increased dramatically!



According to the report, which was published in May 2008 by the central coordinator for the project, Cascadia Research Collective in Olympia, Washington, there were fewer than 1,500 humpback whales in the region when the last population studies were done in the 1960s. Today, the population has rebounded to approximately 18,000 to 20,000 animals.

Researchers attribute this increase to the international banning of whaling in the region in 1966; the institution of federal protection laws in the 1970s, including the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act; and the increased public awareness of the problem, which has been driven by many groups, including the sanctuary. The SPLASH study was the most ambitious, large-scale study ever conducted on any whale population in the world.

Initiated by NOAA and key partners in 2004, SPLASH brought together more than 400 researchers from 50 organizations throughout the Pacific Rim, including the United States, Japan, Russia, Mexico, Canada, Philippines, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.

David Mattila, science and rescue coordinator for the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, served on the SPLASH Steering Committee, and coordinated work in Hawai'i. "I think that SPLASH has been tremendously successful, and that the data collected was right on target or above target," said Mattila. "Coordinating a project of this magnitude between so many individuals, organizations and countries was incredibly complex."


Funding for SPLASH came from NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and National Marine Fisheries Service, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Pacific Life Foundation, Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, along with support from a number of other organizations and governmental agencies.

Research took place in all known humpback whale northern summer feeding habitats in the Bering Sea, Russia, Canada, Alaska the northwest United States and California. Winter mating and calving research took place in Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Guatemala, Hawai'i and Southeast Asia.

Primary goals of the study included collecting detailed information about migratory behaviors and routes, population distribution, genetic history and human impact. SPLASH used three primary methods of study: (1) photos to identify individual whales, (2) biopsy sampling, and (3) photos to assess human impacts.

Photo identification involved taking more than 18,000 photos of whale tail flukes to identify 8,000 individual whales. By matching flukes photographed in their feeding areas with those photographed in the wintering areas, researchers were able to determine the patterns of individual whale movements, as well as estimate the sizes of different populations. Thousands of other photos were also taken of body scars to determine the frequency and distribution of ship strikes and whale entanglement in fishing gear.

Researchers also collected more than 6,000 biopsy samples for studies of genetics and toxin levels. Early results indicate that while humpbacks generally show less impact from some human activities like toxins the further they live from industrialized areas, there is no population in the North Pacific that does not show significant impact from entanglement.

According to David Mattila, results show a complex picture of some unexpected interchange of individuals over great distances, and yet there remain some small, isolated groups like the Asian and Central American populations, but more funding is needed to complete the task of synthesizing the photograph and genetic data in order to fully understand this. To read the entire SPLASH Final Report, go to the Cascadia Research Web site: www.cascadiaresearch.org/SPLASH/splash.htm. 



Sanctuary Campaign Focuses on Safe Boating

As many as 10,000 whales will visit Hawaiian waters between November and May this upcoming whale season. In an effort to protect humpback whales and to promote safe boating practices, the sanctuary has once again launched its Safe Boating Campaign. The campaign includes boater workshops, the distribution of related publications, and a series of public service announcements and advertisements.

Workshops

The boater workshops will be held throughout the main Hawaiian Islands. The sanctuary Marine Mammal Response Manager Ed Lyman and NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement's Jeff Pollack will review tips, guidelines, and laws meant to keep ocean users and whales safe. See the events calendar or the sanctuary's Web site for a detailed schedule.

Related Publications

The Humpback Whales Boating & Ocean Use Guide for Safety and Conservation outlines guidelines and regulations designed to help boaters, whale watchers, and other ocean users stay safe and legal on the water.

Hawai'i's Marine Protection Species: A Handbook for Ocean Users highlights information on marine protected species and the federal and state laws and regulations that protect them.

The Vessel Collision Reporting Information Sticker features the information needed to report a whale in distress. Boaters are asked to place this sticker on each of their vessels.

Contact your local sanctuary office for copies of these publications or download them on the sanctuary's Web site.

Reporting Information

The sanctuary receives a great deal of assistance from ocean users in monitoring ship-struck, entangled, and otherwise injured whales. According to Ed Lyman, marine mammal response manager for the sanctuary, "Finding injured or entangled marine animals is like finding big needles in an even larger haystack. It is critical that we get reports so that we have the opportunity to save some animals. Even if we cannot find every animal in question, the ones that we do save and the data we collect may help us determine the magnitude of the threat and reduce these threats in the future."

Violations – Report 100-yard approach rule violations and other incidents of humpback whale harassment or disturbance to the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement, 24-hour enforcement hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

Injuries – Report injured, entangled and stranded whales, vessel-whale collisions, and other marine mammal health concerns to the NOAA Fisheries 24-hour marine mammal hotline at 1-888-256-9840.
